



5 Keys to Choosing a Digital-Content Platform

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5 Keys to Choosing a Digital-Content Platform

With the right platform, digital learning materials can provide students with an interactive, adaptive, and engaging experience that's worlds away from glorified PDFs. Here's what colleges and universities need to know before they select a platform partner.

At a Berlin conference recently, the developer of a digital-content platform made a plea to the textbook publishers in the audience: “No one wants your PDFs!” That includes students. Three years ago, the University of California at Davis (UC Davis), sold a paltry \$35,000 in PDF e-texts. In contrast, this year it expects to sell nearly \$2 million in e-texts that use the EPUB 3 open industry standard (see sidebar, “EPUB 3 at a Glance”). These new digital products reflow and resize content to fit any device, incorporate rich video and interactive components, embed assessments, and provide sophisticated user analytics. In other words, they give students what they want, where and when they want it.

In this new dynamic, data-rich learning environment, “print under glass,” as PDFs are often described, is no more useful than the paper products it replicates. “Once you put interactivity and media into a book, you’ve left forever comparisons to print and the print environment,” said William Chesser, cofounder and vice president of business development at

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VitalSource®, whose Bookshelf® platform is fully compliant with EPUB 3 standards. “Once you’ve got a genuinely immersive experience, you can no longer even compare it to the simple EPUB or PDF world. From a student’s point of view, it’s an entirely different value proposition.”

Equally important, this new immersive experience is not a standalone silo. It’s tightly integrated with the university’s learning management system (LMS), analytic systems, and online community tools to create a learning environment that can engage students better, monitor their progress, and, ultimately, help them succeed.

Not surprisingly, this interconnected world is a lot more complicated than simply having students show up to class with textbook in hand: It requires a platform to manage, distribute, and track this digital content. How that platform operates will determine the kind of experience students and faculty enjoy. In terms of importance, a school’s digital-content platform ranks right up there with the LMS and SIS, and schools should apply the same due diligence to its selection as they would to these other enterprise systems.

Importantly, not all digital-content platforms are created equal. These programs have been around long enough for leaders to identify the factors that make a program a success.

Colleges and universities should ensure that any digital-content platform satisfies the following five criteria.



Scalability and Reliability

The quality of the educational content is the main priority, of course, but the best materials in the world are of little value if the underlying technology cannot deliver them to students. “If you don’t have both content and platform, you have neither,” said Ken Brooks, chief operating officer of Macmillan Learning, which creates educational materials for both secondary and post-secondary institutions. In evaluating prospective partners, school leaders should ask themselves the following questions:

Does the Company Have a Track Record?

Disruptive innovation inevitably spurs a period of churn, when new products and companies are launched in dizzying fashion. Some of these succeed, some go bust, and others are swallowed whole. The digital-content arena in higher education is no different—in fact, the landscape is littered with a surprisingly long list of false starts. In choosing a company and platform, it’s important for colleges to look past flashy features and evaluate platforms based on their time in the market, market penetration, history of innovation, and company size.

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“It’s about working with a partner that’s predictable, reliable, and is going to stick around. That takes all the panic-inducing moments out of the first couple of years of your implementation,” said Chesser. “If you want to see an implementation go south really fast, have the cloud-based access go offline for two days in the middle of exams.”

A stable and reliable partner is as important to e-text publishers as it is to universities. Certainly, they were key considerations for Macmillan Learning when it decided to partner with Ingram, which owns VitalSource. “First, Ingram is a fair and honest broker in the middle,” said Brooks. “For the 20 years I’ve been in the business, Ingram has had a pretty balanced perspective toward the market.”

But Brooks was also attracted by the company's history of innovation. "The second reason [we partnered with Ingram] is their acquisition of VitalSource years ago," he said. "It's a very good platform and they've just improved on it since then."

UC Davis was also looking for a partner that would help the school accelerate away from PDFs toward a more engaging experience for students, and it ultimately selected VitalSource. "We think VitalSource is continually looking to improve the digital-content experience," said Jason Lorgan, executive director of UC Davis stores. He cited the company's recent partnership with Cerego, a San Francisco company that specializes in personalized learning. The resulting product, Bookshelf GPS, "layers personalized learning capabilities on top of a traditional e-book to give the content an adaptive feel," said Lorgan. "It makes the content more appropriate for each student's level within the course."

Will the Platform Scale to Our Technical Needs?

Enterprise systems at universities are increasingly intertwined, which means that changes in one system inevitably cause a ripple effect in other systems. In selecting a digital-content platform, schools should consider the ability of the vendor to manage these changes quickly and seamlessly. "Future proofing is probably the most significant part when you think of a scale partner," said Chesser. "You need a partner that's going to be here and is going to be able to accommodate the technical scale of your implementation. Remember, scale is not just page views: It's downloads onto continually up-to-date native apps. It's integration points across the full range of LMS and virtual learning environment systems. It's ongoing, ever-changing support for data standards like Caliper (analytics) and xAPI (sharing of learning records and experiences). It's a never-ending commitment to accessibility standards for disabled learners and teachers."



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While it's easy to be wowed by the bells and whistles of some of the offerings on the market, it's important to pick a partner that focuses on the more mission-critical aspects of keeping the trains running. "The iPad iOS is going to change four or five times over the next 18 months," said Chesser, using Apple as an example. "Each time, schools will have to work with their partner to accommodate those changes and ensure that they do not break everything about their systems. That's just one of dozens of update pressure points."

Do We Want a Walled Garden or Open Standards?

In some respects, today's landscape for digital-content platforms resembles the LMS industry of 5–10 years ago. Back then, educators railed against the closed LMS systems of vendors such as Blackboard, which they saw as "walled gardens" preventing the use of new web services, social media, and more. Under market pressure, the established LMS players ultimately decided to embrace more open system architecture. Indications are that many publishers and vendors of digital-content platforms will follow a similar path.

"I think industry standards like EPUB 3 and Caliper are incredibly important, and a lot of publishers are making a big push toward them," said Mary Millar, director of software engineering at Elsevier, which distributes its digital materials through Bookshelf. "They allow us to reuse our content without having to do a specialized version for every institution we deal with, and they minimize integration headaches."

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Plus, open standards give colleges and universities more power to choose the learning materials that suit their needs, regardless of the publisher. "We believe in meeting our customers where they are," said Brooks about Macmillan Learning's decision to use the Bookshelf platform. "We find that the walled-garden approach is really trying to force the publisher's view down purchasers' throats."

The use of a common platform makes particular sense in schools or departments that use a federated decision-making model. By having the digital content from various publishers housed on a common platform, schools need just one faculty-training initiative, one customer-support path, and one integration path. "School leaders have to ask themselves, 'Am I OK with an implementation where different professors and different departments use different systems?'" said Chesser. "All of this has to be maintained, and you could end up in your Chemistry Department with nine different logins for students and teachers, nine different training paths, and nine different score paths."

On the other side of the coin are three to four giants such as McGraw-Hill Education that have evolved from publishers into fully fledged learning-science companies that deliver their own digital content through their own custom platforms. These companies have the potential to be one-stop shops, because they have everything that a particular academic discipline, such as an MBA program, might need in terms of content and platform, although professors may balk at being restricted to the offerings of a single vendor. Nevertheless, selecting a single partner does make sense in certain scenarios, particularly at very decentralized universities.

"There are some advantages to this kind of walled-garden environment, and it will be the right solution in certain cases," said Chesser. "You can really build out expansive feature and function sets in terms of the immersive depth of the platform as well as the ability to have grade books and other proprietary plug-in tools."

Accessibility

Accessibility is one of those broad umbrella terms that mean different things to different people. Schools evaluating digital-content platforms need to focus on two specific areas:

Students With Disabilities

In recent years, a number of universities have run afoul of the Americans With Disabilities Act over a range of technology initiatives spanning from lecture capture to screen readers. While the vast majority of colleges and publishers support the goals of accessibility, some have stumbled over its implementation for one simple reason: It's not easy.

"We needed to have accessible content, but it's really difficult to have e-PDFs that can be consistently read by five different readers," said Brooks of some of Macmillan's early challenges in this area. "We decided that EPUB 3 was the way to go, because it's accessible at its core."

Macmillan was also impressed with VitalSource's commitment to making accessibility central to its Bookshelf platform. "The platform itself is consistently rated the highest from an accessibility perspective," said Stephen Davis, vice president of information security, privacy, accessibility and piracy at Macmillan. "VitalSource has worked very hard to create a platform that is highly accessible."


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It's a message echoed by the National Federation of the Blind itself. According to Lorgan, UC Davis received a letter from the NFB recommending that the university adopt VitalSource for use by its blind students. "Accessibility was a really important piece for us," said Lorgan, noting that the Student Disability Office conducted a side-by-side comparison of accessibility features on competing platforms. "We found the VitalSource platform to be far superior to the other platforms. The company takes accessibility just as seriously as we do, and they will work with us on any issues that we encounter. It's not an after-thought for them."

BYOD and Offline Access

Ask any IT administrator about the average number of devices that each student connects to the university network and he'll probably scream. Students are using a staggering array of devices for both play and work, and schools need to meet them where they live. Given that, it's not surprising that PDFs landed with an unhappy thud on campuses—they don't automatically resize to the screen—as did e-texts that required a download restricted to just one device.

Any digital-content platform today must deliver content when and where it's wanted; otherwise, it's a nonstarter. "The first thing schools should look for is mobile and online accessibility," said Millar. "Those are the features that students are clamoring for, especially since more students are now non-traditional."



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It's certainly of uppermost importance in the minds of students at UC Davis, where sales of e-texts have exploded over the past three years compared to the sale of traditional print textbooks. "Most campuses don't have a computer requirement, so the content has to be device agnostic," said Lorgan. "Students go from their tablets to their laptops to their phones, and the content is available on whichever device they're using. That's very important, because our students want to read while they're on the bus or wherever."

For the same reason, schools can't assume that students are always going to have an Internet connection. Indeed, the ability to access EPUB 3 files offline is one of the great advantages of a platform like Bookshelf. "Being able to get to that content offline is really important, especially if someone is doing a clinical rotation at hospitals," said Millar, who noted that Elsevier creates a lot of instructional material for nursing students. "Their access to the Internet is often spotty."

According to Chesser, many of the custom platforms fail to deliver a similar offline experience to EPUB 3-based systems: "Most of these publisher-based systems struggle to give you a little ancillary that'll work offline, but you have to be online for the main stuff. That just does not cut it when you are studying for boards and having to negotiate your Internet connection." With VitalSource, students can even access their notes while working offline. When they reconnect, any additional notes made while offline automatically sync.



Inclusive Access Licensing

For years, e-textbooks received a bad rap over their high cost: Rented PDF-style texts were often the same price as their print equivalents or perhaps slightly cheaper. Add to that the underwhelming user experience PDFs offer, and it's no surprise that sales of earlier PDF-textbooks were anemic.

That is changing rapidly today, thanks to a new licensing approach borrowed from the software industry. Inclusive access, as it is known, allows a university to buy a site license for all the students in a specific class at a deep discount.

"The savings are usually in the area of 40 percent to 70 percent compared to the new print price," said Lorgan. "Most of the time, it's closer to 70 percent."

When a faculty member at UC Davis signs up for an inclusive access license, students enrolling in that class receive a message with information about the course content, its cost, and how they can access it. In the case of UC Davis, the materials are made available through the LMS. Students then have two weeks when they can use the content for free. At the end of that period, they have the ability to opt out—by law, schools cannot force students to buy a license. If students take no action, they are billed on the next university statement.

"We're seeing very few people opt out," said Lorgan, adding that a recent campus survey showed that 80 percent of students are satisfied with the delivery model. "It's a huge improvement over classes that use print textbooks, where a significant number of students go without content for the entire quarter due to cost considerations."

For Lorgan, ensuring that students have the necessary course materials is one of the most attractive components of the licensing program. “Faculty love the day-one access,” said Lorgan. “In the print environment, it may take students two weeks to get their materials. In a 10-week term, that means they don’t have the content for 20 percent of the course.”

Adding to the popularity of the program is the fact that the e-texts are newer EPUB 3 products, featuring interactive components and adaptive content such as quizzes. Ninety percent of e-text sales at UC Davis now come from the products within the program. “We’ve had more than 70,000 students enrolled in courses—mostly introductory general education courses—that use the inclusive access program,” said Lorgan. “Those students have saved about \$4 million over the price of new print textbooks.”

In addition to the cost savings, a 2016 study of 500 college students by Wakefield Research showed that students who have access to their course materials on the first day of class are more likely to receive a better grade than those who delay their purchase.

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Data Analytics

Data analytics are perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of the new breed of e-texts and have enormous potential to improve learning outcomes. Whether they’re looking at embedded quizzes or how long students spend in particular modules, analytics tools offer a deep-dive picture of how students are faring—and how the material itself is being received.

“I can’t think of a publisher that’s not investing a lot in this area,” said Brooks. “Professors want to see if somebody is struggling with a concept and be able to assign remedial material.” It has definitely struck a chord among the faculty at UC Davis, according to Lorgan. Now when students come to office hours to discuss their performance, for example, a professor can see how much time they are actually spending on the material. “It gives them a little more data,” he said. “It also can warn faculty in advance that students may be falling behind.”

Many publishers have their own analytics tools, as do many colleges and universities. Platform providers like VitalSource see it as their role to supply the data needed to feed those tools. “We’re going to take that data—and it’s a lot of data—and deliver it back to you in some very basic dashboards,” said Chesser, noting that VitalSource utilizes Caliper Analytics, an industry standard for sharing data. “What you really want from us is the raw feed of the data. In fact, we’re the first company in the world that will give you a real-time Caliper data feed of students interacting with the content.”

The Holy Grail, says Chesser, is to use the e-text data with other data points to build a holistic picture of student performance. “You’re really going to see a payoff when you take our data and add it to other streams of data on your campus,” he said. “You can then develop behavior profiles that allow you to intervene on behalf of student success and retention. If you see certain behaviors in the first two weeks of class, for example, you might know that student is at risk of dropping out or failing the course.”

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But students are not the only beneficiaries of this kind of data mining. Publishers and faculty members can also use the data to improve their performance. “Our authors and content creators want to know what parts of an e-book are popular and what’s being used,” said Millar. For their part, professors can identify those areas where students routinely have difficulties and develop new approaches for teaching the material.



Faculty Training

“The single most important factor in the success of a digital-content program on campus is faculty training,” said Chesser. “You can’t just flip a switch and have e-books show up in the LMS and expect everything to be great.”

The importance of faculty training will be familiar advice to anyone who’s implemented a technology initiative on campus. On top of the usual concerns about technology, though, the idea that training is even needed for a “textbook” unsettles some administrators and faculty, particularly those with well-established teaching routines.

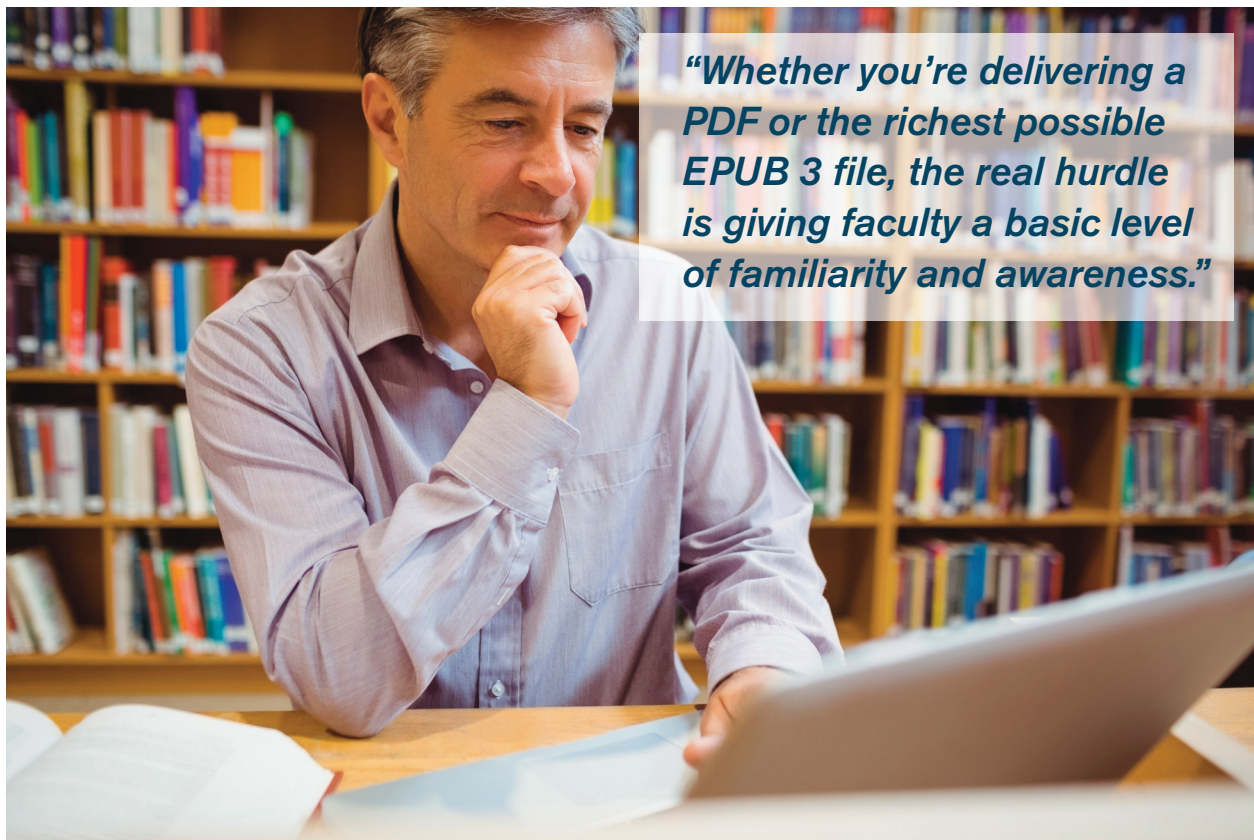
In Chesser’s view, though, such anxiety is unwarranted. While new e-books may bear scant resemblance to printed textbooks or even old-style PDFs, their use doesn’t require a deep dive into the technical weeds either. “Whether you’re delivering a PDF or the richest possible EPUB 3 file, the real hurdle is giving faculty a basic level of familiarity and awareness,” he added. “Getting faculty to understand a book’s navigation and richness of interaction is secondary to their learning how to open the book for the first time—that’s the layer that makes all the difference.”

At UC Davis, the school store assumes responsibility for introducing faculty to the Bookshelf platform. “The faculty’s role is to be an expert in biology or chemistry or math,” said Lorgan. “We take responsibility for helping them gain the knowledge they need about the technology through videos and webinars.”

The UC Davis store has also taken steps to address faculty fears that students will look to them for technical assistance. “When faculty are considering a transition from print to digital, one of their biggest concerns is their ability to provide technical support to students,” said Lorgan. “So we try to take on that role for them. Our job is to be an expert in how students access that content.”

Many of the training resources used at UC Davis, such as webinars and videos, come directly from VitalSource. In addition, the company will contract with schools to develop and deliver in-person training programs to ensure that faculty become supporters—not detractors—of e-texts and their potential to change how students learn.

“Students will thrive in the platform if the faculty uses it,” said Chesser. “If the faculty avoids it, then (surprise!) students will report at the end of the semester that they didn’t derive much use from the e-textbook.”





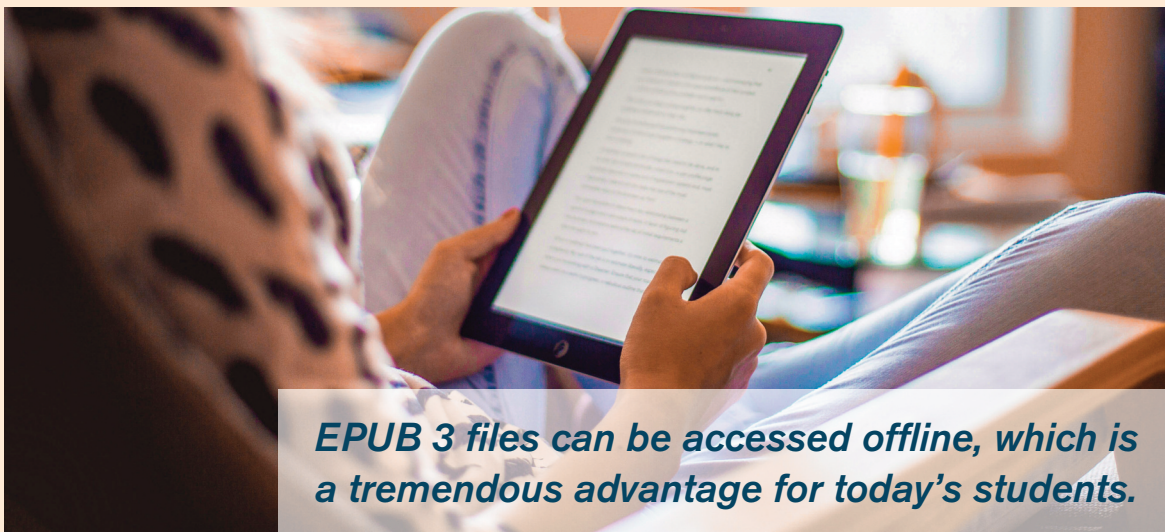
EPUB 3 at a Glance

EPUB 3 was developed by the International Digital Publishing Forum as an industry standard for the distribution and exchange of digital materials. It's HTML5 at its core, which means that it has all the interactive and immersive capabilities typically found in proprietary systems, and—unlike old-style PDFs—text will reflow to fit whatever device it's playing on. What's more, EPUB 3 files can be accessed offline, which is a tremendous advantage for today's students, the majority of whom are non-traditional learners juggling family and work.

Prior to EPUB 3's development, publishers were unable to embed interactive or rich media materials within their e-texts, which led to a very fractured user experience. "We always had these interactive and immersive media experiences as supplements, but you would have to link out to them," said Ken Brooks, chief operating officer of Macmillan Learning. "But with EPUB 3, you can incorporate it into the package. We're now seeing a much more integrated presentation of all the material."

And because it's open-standards based, EPUB 3 plays nicely with other systems. "It'll work on a variety of platforms," said William Chesser, cofounder of VitalSource, whose Bookshelf platform meets EPUB 3 standards. "It'll interact with the LMS or even your e-commerce system."

Despite the enormous promise of EPUB 3, publishers were nevertheless slow to move to the new platform. "We aggressively supported EPUB 3 after it came out, but for two years it was as if we were at the dance waiting for our dates to show up," said Chesser. "It's really only in the last nine to 12 months that we're finally starting to see a meaningful amount of content come into the market in the EPUB 3 format."



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About VitalSource



VitalSource Technologies LLC, part of Ingram Content Group LLC, is improving the learning experience by making it easier to create and deliver effective and affordable content. The preferred choice among educational institutions and companies for digital learning materials, VitalSource® helps over 1,000 educational content providers create and deliver seamless interactive learning experiences through its exclusive Bookshelf® platform to millions of learners at 7,000 institutions. Bookshelf users opened more than 18 million digital textbooks last year and read more than 2.4 billion pages.

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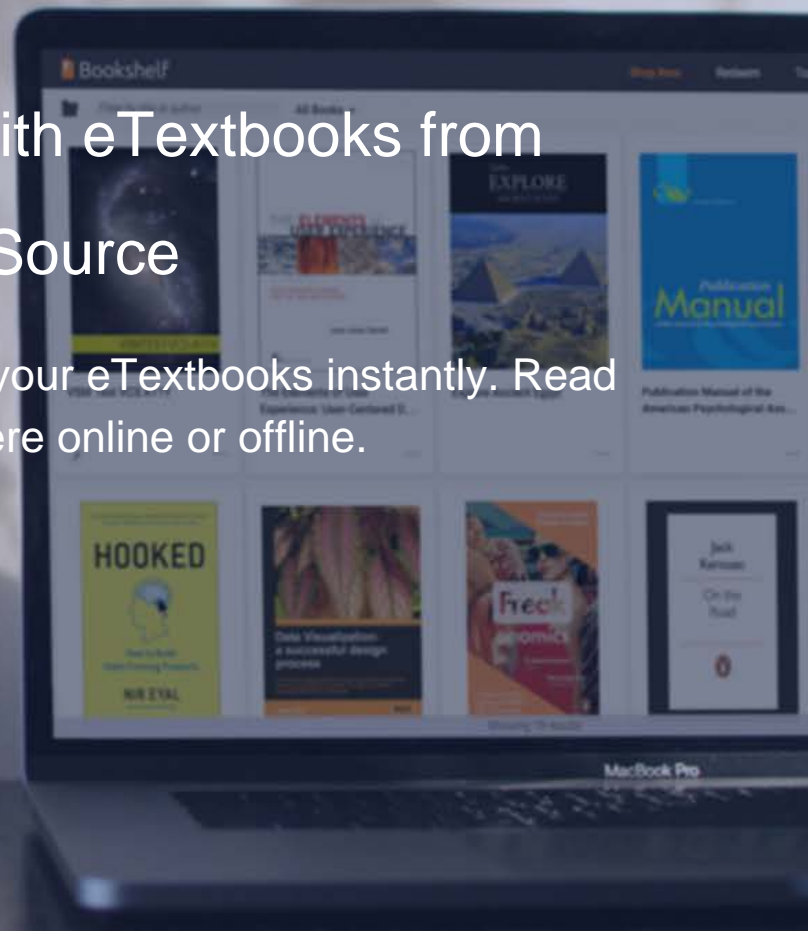
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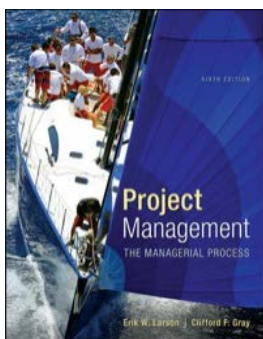


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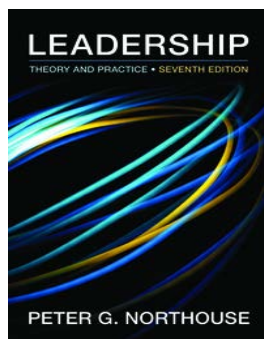


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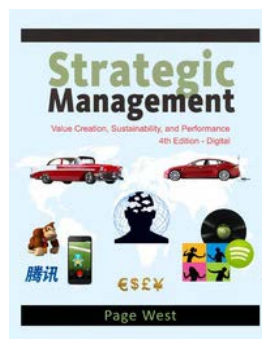
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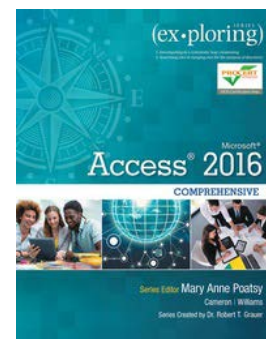
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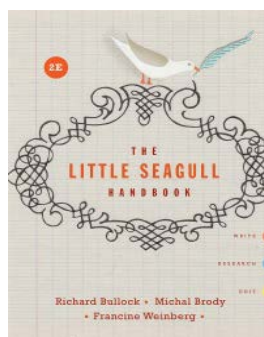
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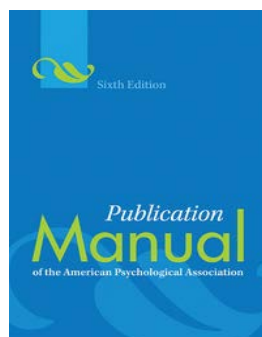
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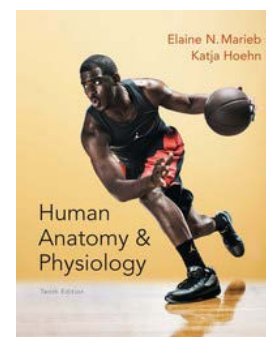
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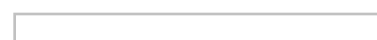
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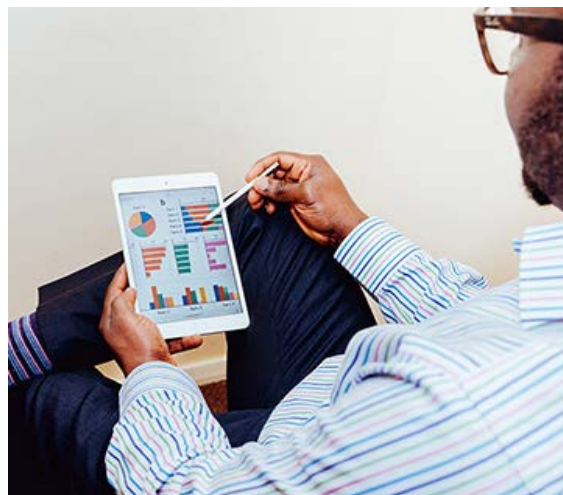
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